

Suppression of
The English Monasteries.
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I

Reign of Henry VIII to year 1534.
Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509. He inherited from his father a kingdom more firmly established than any King of England had reigned over for generations, and he duly estimated the value of his Crown. His natural aristocratic tendencies were increased by a passionate and violent temper, which could brook no contradiction. Henry was also a man of some learning, and in 1521², he published a book, in which he defended the Papacy and the doctrines of the Church against the attacks of Luther. In recognition of this defense, Pope Leo X gave him the title of Defender. I. Hauser, p. 166. (2) Perry, 4. 4. p. 34

of the Faith." These three suggestions give us a hint of conditions about the year 1523. In addition to the nature of Henry's character, and the relations of Henry to the Pope, we must bear in mind that the period in which these events happened was one of strange contradictions, and general unrest. By the year 1526 Henry VIII had tired of his Queen Catherine, and perhaps was beginning to feel dissatisfied because no male heir had been born. Added to this Henry had become infatuated with Anne Boleyn. Woollen says²: "The desire for a male heir to the throne, and his passion for Anne Boleyn (which showed itself in 1526) ... suddenly caused him to feel scruples of conscience as

¹ Makut. p. 293. (2) vol. 3. p. 201.

to the legality of his marriage, and the validity of the papal dispensation; these were fostered by his ambitious minister Cardinal Wolsey for political reasons (in order to bring about a political alliance with France, in opposition to Char. V) and also from a desire to secure his own position." So in 1526 Wolsey began proceedings for a divorce of Henry and Catherine to be granted by the Pope, the account of political complications on the continent, the Pope did not see his way clear to granting the divorce. Wolsey's failure here brought upon him the displeasure of the King. Proceedings were begun against him under the Statute of Praemunire. The Act.

9th 1529, Wolsey surrendered all his appointments and property.¹ On the 29th of Nov. 1530, while on his way to the Tower under arrest, Wolsey died.⁽²⁾

Activities in the direction of a divorce continued, In response to these, Clement VII warns Henry VIII not to marry Anne Boleyn. This warning was on Jan 5th 1531.³ Henry's activities continue in England, and on March 22nd of the same year,⁴ the entering ^{of the} wedge was made when the Convocation of Canterbury agreed to pay the King £100,000 and recognise his supremacy.⁵ In 1531, the English clergy were coerced into declaring that Henry was the "the protector and the supreme head of the church, and of the clergy of England" which absurd claim was slightly

¹ Wakenon. 210. ⁽²⁾ Wakenon 210.

³ Sander. 347. ⁵ Wakenon 211. ⁴ Sander. 347.

modified by the words "in so far as is permitted by the law of Christ"¹ This action was evidently taken in anticipation of the secret marriage of Henry to Anne Boleyn which took place sometime in Nov. 1532, or in Jan. 1533.² From this time on the trend of events is unmistakable. On March 30, 1533,³ Crommer was consecrated to the Archbishopric of Canterbury to which office he had been appointed some time earlier. On April 10th, the Act in restraint of appeals (24 Hen. VIII., c. 12) was passed. This took away the right of the pope to hear certain cases on appeal from England.⁴ This was the second blow in the process of separation. This was followed on the 29th of May by the final blow, when Crommer, officially

¹ (Michelet 297) ⁽²⁾ Wakenon 217. ⁽³⁾ Sander. 348

⁽⁴⁾ Wakenon 218.

"set aside the marriage with Catherine as null and void, and declared that with Anne Boleyn good and valid." ¹

The Pope of course declared to the opposite opinion, but to no effect. The break between Henry and Rome was complete. The whole thing was clinched by the Supreme Head Act passed by Parliament in 1534. This declared that the King should be accepted as the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England. ²

These events give us one line of influences which worked towards the suppression of the monasteries and taken in connection with another series of events show how this divorce case and the separation from the papacy tended to bring about a feeling of strong

(1) Wokhemere 219. (2) Wokhemere 223.

opposition to the monasteries. These other series of events is connected with the opposition which very noticeably arose in England as a protest to Henry's high minded ruling. There is not to suppose that such a radical change could be made in such a short period of time without causing a determined opposition.

The story of Elizabeth Barton, the Holy Maid of Kent illustrates this opposition. It is useless to enter into the details of that story. She went into trances, and under such conditions spoke in opposition to the divorce to Catherine and the marriage to Anne Boleyn. Craumer writes, in a letter. "I think that she marvelously hindered the King's marriage, for she wrote to the Pope charging

(1) Gasquet, VI P. 122

him to stop it. She also had coun-
 munications with my Lord Cardinal
 and with my Lord of Canterbury, my
 predecessor in the matter, and in
 my opinion stand there very much
 in the matter." (Coleman, VI. 20. 1519)

In July 1533, she was brought before
 Cromwell for examination. Nothing
 worthy of punishment could be found.
 The proceedings against her were
 continued until May 5th, 1534, when
 "Elizabeth Barton and her companions
 were executed under this unjust
 act of attainder at Tyburn. Father
 Stowes Bouchier, and English Francis-
 can Abbot, declares that the lives
 of his two Brethren, Fathers Risby and
 Rich were twice offered to them if
 they would accept Henry as the
 Gagnat 124. vol. I.

the supreme head of the Church!"
 This same attitude is shown towards
 the Friars. "So rancid his designs
 it became necessary for Henry to
 deal sternly and at once with the
 religious orders." Many of the Friars
 were imprisoned, or in some in-
 stances suffered death because of
 their opposition to the King's conduct
 and the support of the Pope.³ This was
 a strong opposition which had developed
 in Henry's own country. On June 22nd
 1535, Fisher, Bishop of Rochester was
 executed. July 6th Sir Thomas More
 met the same fate." All these events
 indicate clearly a feeling of strong
 opposition which was being developed
 side by side with Henry's policy.
 As these accounts indicate this

Gagnat vol. I. 140. (2) Gagnat. VI. 155.

3. Gagnat. 167. Wokenon 237. (4) Wokenon 235.

opposition tended to center about the monastic houses. In short at this period just previous to the suppression of the monasteries, we find that Henry had brought about a complete separation of the English Church from the Papacy. This had given rise to a rather determined opposition to Henry which centered about the monasteries.

II

Financial condition of Henry VIII.

It would be impossible to even touch the edges of the question of the suppression of the monasteries without referring to the financial side of the reign of Henry VIII. The personal, and public extravagance

of Henry VIII is manifest on all sides. Though Henry VIII was personally extravagant, and soon run through this large sum (collected during the reign of his father) he had resources to draw upon which his father had left untouched.....; it was left for the "Defender of the Faith" to appropriate the lands of the monasteries and to make out his resources by debasing the coinage." That this was one of the conditions which led to the suppression of the monasteries cannot be doubted. In fact the disposal of this wealth indicates that there must have been some strong property motive back of it. "The King was granted the revenues"
¹Curmington, vol. 3, p. 432.

of the monasteries. About half the money was expended in coast defences, and a new navy; and much of it was lavished upon his courtiers. With the exception of small pensions to the monks and the establishment of a few benefices, very little of the splendid revenue was ever devoted to religious or educational purposes."¹

Even under Wolsey we see a tendency to use money thus gained for the establishment of colleges. In a letter written by the Abbot of York to Cardinal Wolsey in the year 1525,² the Abbot refers to the suppression of the small monastery of Romsburgh.

Thirskent. 230
Wright. 2.

The letter reads. . . . "by whose profute I perceive that your graces pleasure ys to suppress the said priory of Romsburgh."¹

In a letter from Cornwall to Wolsey written April 2. 1528, the same idea appears concerning the monastery at Wobbingford. "Having shewy the evidences which I sorted and conveyed unto your college at Oxford and the same delivered unto your Deane there"⁽²⁾ In the same letter he says "And now I do referre unto the Countie of Buck and Bedford for officers to be founde there aswell of such lordes as offer theyre to the said late monasterie of Wobbingford as also to the late monasterie"
Wright 2. (2) Merriam. p. 318.

of Prayre besides sainte
 Albours." ⁷ In fact during the
 entire year of 1527, and 28, Cromwell
 was employed in doing just
 this kind of work. Wolsey was
 undoubtedly the first to hit
 upon this plan of raising money.
 In such a man as Henry VIII and
 Cromwell, it does not seem very
 difficult to step from the idea
 of suppression of monasteries to
 raise funds for the establish-
 ment of Colleges, to the idea of
 suppressing them for the sake of
 the funds for other purposes.
 In short it seems apparent that
 their element must enter
 into the consideration of the
 question.

⁷ Merivale, 319.

III

Visitations

Jan 1535 marks rather a central
 date in the account of the
 suppression of the monasteries.
 During that month, ^{Howe or Cromwell} was announc-
 ed as the King's Vicar General
 for the purpose of "undertaking a
 general visitation of churches
 monasteries, and clergy." ¹¹⁵ He
 was given the authority to trans-
 fer his powers to men who were
 to act as his agents. In connection
 with this announcement, there
 was issued a document
 consisting of a series of formal in-
 quiries to be made concerning
 the state of religious houses
 and royal injunctions for
 1- Merivale 166.

their reforms".

At this point a word ought to be said concerning Thomas Cromwell. He was a man of low birth, who had worked himself up to this position of highest importance in England, by his keenness coupled with absolute ~~to~~ lack of ethical principles. He was unscrupulous to the highest degree, and seemed to have but one ambition and that was to gain his own preferment. Gasquet (Vol. I. P. 432) says of Cromwell, "He had flandered and murdered defenceless men and women; he had endeavored to rob the religious of their refuges as he had of their property; he had defrauded the people of their

1 - Merivon, 166.

rights," while this is an extreme statement, it is probably quite true. Such in short is the man who had in hand the visitation of the monasteries.

By August 1535 Cromwell had appointed his commissioners, and they had begun their work. Thomas Legh in a letter dated Aug 20th (probably 1535) says that he has visited several places. . . . "I have in all the places that I have been at, according to myne instructions and to the King's graces pleasure and yours, restrained as well the heads and masters of the same places as the brethren from going forth." Also he speaks in the same letter of the visitations of "doctors Laitone. Aug 9. 1535" (2)

¹ Wright. P. 16 (2) Merivon vol. 7. 415

Cromwell writes to the Earl of Rutland asking him to examine a certain Warden and his priors. So early in August his system was beginning to work.

Just what instructions his commissioners had received is uncertain. But evidently the minds of Legh, Laitone, and Rice, the appointees, had been instructed to find ~~for~~ cause for complaint if possible. Legh was not unwilling to say in his letter to Cromwell that the things he had done were obnoxious to the monks. ¹ Again in a letter from Dr. Loxton to Cromwell, ² there appears evidence of strong desire to find conditions of immorality. "Whereas immediately descending from my horse, I sent Bartlett, your servant with all my servants, to circumspect
Wright 46. (2) Wright 75

the abbey" The whole tone of this letter suggests elation ~~to~~ in finding a clear case of immorality in this monastery. Evidently the commissioner is trying to feed the Vicar general with the things that he is looking for. "As concerning these things, I shall desire your mastership of farther knowledge what I shall do, and I shall be ready to accomplish you myrde in this and in all other things with diligence..." ⁽²⁾
He is forced to conclude that in this visitation the commissioners had been given to understand that it would be very acceptable to the King and Cromwell to have as many reports of corruption as possible to come in. There is no
Wright 75 (2) Wright 82 letter to Cromwell.

good reason for doubting this, and one should bear it in mind that the reports have probably been exaggerated for the express purpose of meeting this desire of Cromwell.

This work of visitation and investigation continued. Reports implying all sorts of gross immorality and vice had been sent in. It is needless to say that there must have been some foundation, but undoubtedly a good portion of the reports greatly exaggerated. However the evidence had been of such a nature that by the end of February 1536, Parliament passed the Act of Suppression.[†] It provided that on account of the "manifest synners, vicious, carnall, and
1. Bright 107

abominable living to the high displeasure of Almighty God, slander of good religion, and to the great infamy of the Kings highness, and the realm"; the monasteries and "parishes with all their rights, profits jurisdictions and commodities" should be transferred "unto the Kinges majestye, and to his heirs and assigns for ever"⁽²⁾ It provided for the suppression of the smaller monasteries whose income was less than £200 a year.

This act marks the end of the first series of events, and the beginning of the second series in the suppression of the monasteries. In connection with it I might 107. (2) Bright. 108.

there are two points which ought to be noticed. The first is the line of demarcation between the smaller and larger monastic houses. To imagine that the moral condition of a monastery could in general be determined by the amount of yearly income, is ~~one~~ the force of its superficial. Political influences were undoubtedly responsible for this discrimination, and later events showed that the declaration that the larger monasteries "where religion is right well kept and observed" would be left without molestation, was simply a "blind" to keep opposition from becoming demonstrative.

The second point is in regard

to the "Black Book". This supposedly contained a detailed statement of the condition of life in the monasteries. The fact is that it does not exist, and it is possible that it never did exist, although Burnet says. The full report of this visitation is lost, yet I have seen an extract of a part of it, concerning one hundred and forty four houses, that contains abominations in it equal to any that were in Sodom.[†] It makes little difference whether there ever was such a book or not. The fact remains that upon some kind of evidence the act of suppression was passed, and the moral condition of the monasteries was made use of as justification for the Act.

[†] Burnet I. 307.

Just what the purpose of this reform movement was cannot be determined positively. To say that the work thus far done was done distinctively as a reformatory measure, would be to ignore every of the conditions which undoubtedly had a great, perhaps the preponderating influence in the movement. There was indeed an atmosphere of dissatisfaction with Catholic Church and the Popery. This undoubtedly formed the background of the movement, and would justify such a whole process of confiscation and spoliation as the Act of Supremacy inaugurated. To go beyond this statement, and say that from the standpoint of Henry VIII. it was an act of reform as such, would be an exaggeration.

IV

Suppression of the Lesser Monasteries.

As soon as the Act of Suppression had been passed in the early part of 1536, the commissioners appointed by Cromwell began their round of spoliation. By an act of Parliament a Court of Augmentations was established which were as few then for any purposes of justice. "The process of the surrender immediately followed the first visit of the commissioners. The suit in their reports to the Court of Augmentations, which then issued its final orders for the dissolution of the house, and its conversion to the King's use. A "receiver" was appointed to plunder the church, to sell the lead, bells, etc."¹ This work of destruction, and confiscation was

¹ Merivon V. P. 171.

continued through 1536 and 37.

It was done in high handed, arrogant manner, and brought forth a storm of protest. In a letter from "The prioresse and nuns of Legbourne to Cromwell"¹ there appears one type of protest. In this letter Cromwell is addressed as "representative of its founder" "Not whereas Almighty God hath induced you (Cromwell) with just title founder of the priory of Legbourne, we doo, and still always submit our selves to your most righteous commandment and order"⁽²⁾ Upon this claim, that Cromwell represents the founder of the house, they seek some special exemption from the Act of Suppression. On the other hand, the opposition states

¹ Wright 116. ⁽²⁾ Wright 116.

itself among owners of estates, upon which priories of a semi-private type were maintained. In a letter from Sir Peter Edgecomb to Cromwell we read, "But true byt ys, that I am by the Hynges ffather by his grant to my foare ffather made to him and his issue male, ffounder off the priory off Lotteres, and the nunsy of Cornworthy in Devourschyre"¹. Here again a special grant is made the basis of asking special consideration. This protest was undoubtedly very wide spread and at times very bitter and violent. The Pilgrimage of Grace an insurrection which occurred Oct. 2 1536. at South, in Lincolnshire, is an illustration of the extreme type of protest.²

Wright 118. ² Perry 159.

Several thousand men in the north were involved, and several executions were made by the king's authority in efforts to effectually suppress this rebellion.

The nobles were taken from the houses, the monks were driven forth and the buildings demolished.

This work of confiscation and destruction continued until all the monasteries under £200 a year were destroyed. Of this work one gets an idea in the following:—"The first great sweep of the houses under £200 a year, amounting in number to 376 produced, as is supposed, about £32000 annual revenue to the Crown; and from the nobles, jewels, plates, lead, and bell etc, about £100000 was obtained."† This work was com-

† Perry 135

pleted by 1538.

At the same time that the small monasteries were being demolished, the commissioners were reaching out beyond the houses specifically granted them by the act of suppression, and not only did they demolish the smaller houses but they robbed the larger houses, and in many instances the monks were "terrorized into submission" and surrendered to the commissioners all their property. After when they refused to submit, "attainder and death invariably followed." A sample of this aspect of the work is seen in the following letter from "The Commissioners to Cromwell". "Pleaseth it your lordship to be advertised that we have been at saynt Edmunds Burg
1. Merivon Vol. 1. 175 2. Merivon Vol. 1. 175

where we found a riche schryve
 which was very cumbersome to deface.
 We took tokens in the sayed monastery
 in golde and sylver m. n. r. n. r. n.
 markes, and above, dyvers sundry
 stones of great value, and yet we
 have left the church, abbott and
 convent very well furnished with
 plate of sylver for the serve" ⁷ This
 house was one of the largest and most
 wealthy of the English monasteries. It
 was visited at this time on the letter
 indicates for the purpose of confiscating
 its superstitious relics. This kind of
 work was carried on, in many in-
 stances the basis of procedure was the
 complication of the monks in the "fil-
 ginnage of grace"

Wigton, 144.

7

Second visitation and final work.
 By degrees this became a second
 visitation, which was carried on under
 the excuse above mentioned of compli-
 cation in the rebellion. We find a letter
 to Cromwell concerning this second
 visitation to the larger monas-
 teries in which the old commis-
 sioners were to be re-appointed for the
 service ⁷. This second visitation was
 to all intents and purposes a disol-
 ution, for as means feasible they
 forced the houses to surrender, or
 dissolved them for some plausible
 pretext. After the searching visita-
 tions of the commissioners sent
 round the country in 1535 only
 a few of the larger houses.....
 1- Wigt 156

remained unsuppressed. Some of the latter had been voluntarily surrendered, or confiscated by the attainder of their abbots."¹

The result of this visitation leads us to the session of parliament in 1539. At this session the final act was passed giving the monastic estates to the King"⁽²⁾ At the opening of Parliament in 1539, only 20 monasteries were represented. Of these 20, but three were directly represented. The remaining 17 were present by proxy.[†] This indicates how effectively the work of reformation along this line had been done. Of all the magnificent monastic system of England, only a few now remained. at the beginning of this year 1539.

1. Merivon, Vol. 1, 175 (2) Wright 254
(3) Wright 251

Eleven years had passed since the work was begun under Wolsey in 1528.[†] The act of 1539 provided for the completion of the suppression. By the year 1545 the last house had been demolished. Monasticism in England was at an end. "The total number of monasteries suppressed is variously estimated, but the following figures are approximately correct: monasteries 616; colleges, 40; free schools 2374; and hospitals 110. The annual income was about £150,000, which was a smaller sum than was believed to be in the control of the monks."⁽²⁾

† Wright, 2

(2) Wisbech 321.

VI

Use of the Revenue.

Some notions as to the use of the revenue, which was thus received, is necessary in any presentation of this topic. A torrent of wealth had been poured in upon the crown such says Hallam, as has seldom been equalled in any country, by the confiscations, following any subdued rebellions." ^F It is rather a strange fact that evidence is very scarce upon this point. Some of the money, but almost too small a proportion for consideration went to the families accorded certain of the manors and messes, who had been driven from the houses. ^F How large a sum was thus disposed of we cannot say. The other natural channel

vol 1
Memoirs, 178

was open to the use of this money. Burnet says. "He designed to convert 18,000 l. into a revenue for eighteen bishoprics and cathedrals. But of these he only erected six, as shall be afterwards shown." ^F So one has to show rather general inferences as to what became of this money. The large sums of it was expended for national purposes is undoubtedly true. There is also ground for the assertion that a very large portion of the money went to meet the current expenses of Henry's disolute court. It is needless to go in any description of this life, and the cost of maintaining it. The fact remains that the money was disposed of, and still remains unaccounted for. It is a natural

Burnet. vol I. 432

and justifiable statement to say that a large share of the money was used by Henry for private purposes, and the satisfaction of his own desires for luxury and expenses.

In connection with this I think that one may say that this rather doubtful use of the money suggests one of the influences that worked together as an immediate cause of the suppression of the English monastic houses.

VII.

Conclusion.

As one reviews the events of this movement, which has been variously described as the work of God, and the work of the Devil, I think that one must come to the conclusion that to assert that it was distinctively a movement of the reformation of the church ⁱⁿ of England, is to merely make an assertion which is unjustifiable. Such a claim would I fancy bring a knowing smile to the face of Henry or Cromwell. The worst that we can say is that through the working out of events which in themselves were very unimportant from the standpoint of national life, Henry found

himself at odds with Rome. He was to string a man to yield his joint. The only method of procedure was to play a strong hand. He declared himself head of the Church in England. This aroused opposition, which turned his attention to the monasteries. Political and financial considerations lead to the method pursued in the suppression of them.

All these events were in a way but incidents of the reformation. The background of reform spirit served as the moral support which enabled Henry to carry out his plans. To say that the movements of Henry VIII were largely responsible for the English reform-

ation is of course foolish. The facts seem to be that he was the wielder of reform spirit for the realization of his own ends. His early antagonism to Luther, and his later change to antagonism proclaim him rather the tool of the reformation, than in any great sense its leader.

The suppression of the monasteries is the result of the secular interests of Henry VIII reign working themselves out with the background of Gallianism, and its spirit newly kindled by the Lutheran movement.

